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**THE HUNG LOU MENG:
THE YIN-YANG PRINCIPLE OF THE SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL
WORLDS.**

Ronnie Knight

Essay

Second Place

Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in's **Dream of the Red Chamber**, China's most beloved novel, is saturated with various manifestations of the East Asian yin-yang principle of decline and renewal. The appearance of health, wealth and vitality repeatedly gives way to illness, poverty and impotence throughout the various plots and subplots of the **Hung Lou Meng**. Even so, regeneration also occurs with significant regularity. The regenerative element is central for it suggests the productive half of a complete, self-sustaining whole; hence, the continuation of life itself. The narrative thread unifying the characters and events is the repeated intrusion of the supernatural into the natural world. A lame Taoist priest and a scabby-headed Buddhist monk appear, sometimes miraculously, at key moments. Herbert A. Giles, in his **History of Chinese Literature**, states:

The opening chapters (of the **Hung Lou Meng**), which are intended to form a link between the world of spirits and the world of mortals, belong to the supernatural; after that the story runs smoothly along upon earthly lines, always, however, overshadowed by the near presence of spiritual influences.

Gile's brief capsulization mistakenly emphasizes the "earthly lines" of the novel. "Spiritual influences" do not simply "overshadow" everyday existence; indeed, they determine its course.

The verses of poetry which accompany intrusions of this mystical world of spiritual forces are the main concern of this paper. While many theories explaining why Ts'ao wrote the **Dream of the Red Chamber** have been set forth, this paper contends that the novel was written to demonstrate the futility of wealth and fame in a world where mortals are impervious to the supernatural foreshadowing of disaster and, sometimes, even to their own common sense. Yet, in the end the **Hung Lou Meng** confirms both the world of the spiritual and the world of red dust as necessary, complementary elements of spiritual growth.

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The two most frequent interpretations of the title **Hung Lou Meng** are important for understanding the central theme of Ts'ao's novel. **The Dream of the Red Chamber**, probably the most frequently used title, is significant for the word "dream." In the Buddhist-Taoist framework of reference earthly existence, which mortals mistake for reality, is indeed a dream wedged between the greater reality of eternity before the beginning and after the end of life. The world of the spiritual, the eternal world, repeatedly proves its superiority by foreshadowing the events to come in the world of red dust. The **Hung Lou Meng** is also entitled **The Story of the Stone**. The central character, Pao-yu, is, like every mortal, a spiritual "stone" in process. He possesses a spark of the divine and the development of this potential divinity (which necessarily entails experience in the dream of earthly existence) is the central theme of the **Hung Lou Meng**.

The original version of the novel begins with a mythic "story of a stone," intended for use in the construction of heaven, which is cast aside. The stone, feeling rejected and mistakenly believing it has no purpose, takes compassion on a heavenly flower, Purple Pearl, and waters it each morning with heavenly dew. In return the heavenly flower, the earthly Black Jade, is obligated to shed tears for the stone, Pao-yu, in the temporal world as a symbol of gratitude. The stone is found by a priest who takes it to the "Realm of Illusion" for a period of spiritual growth. Pao-yu's entrance into the world of red dust, in keeping with the constant interplay of the two planes of being, is witnessed by a mortal in a dream-vision.

It is significant that Dr. Franz Kuhn's abridged translation of the **Hung Lou Meng** begins with an earthly dream, a vision of spiritual reality. Shih-ying, a wealthy aristocrat, falls asleep in his library and dreams about a conversation between a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest concerning the story of a precious stone, Pao-yu. The bonze and the disciple of Lao-Tzu lead Shih-ying, who appears in the dream to inquire further about the stone, to the "Realm of Illusion" where he is awakened by a sharp clap of thunder, instantly forgetting the dream. This is the moment that Pao-yu enters the world of red dust. To enter the "Phantom Realm of the Great Void" the priest and the monk walk through a great archway. On the pillars supporting the archway, Shih-ying reads the couplet:

When seeming is taken for being,
being becomes seeming.

When nothing is taken for something,
something becomes nothing.

This short couplet foreshadows the whole plot of the **Hung Lou Meng**; it is a most lucid, poetic crystallization of the Buddhist-Taoist outlook of the novel. The Chias, Pao-yu's family, experience decay because of their unwillingness to face the problem of their own moral decline. "Seeming" has become "being" for them. With their wealth, the Chia family was able to create a facade of well-being. The Princess Ancestress attempted to turn the evil omen of the begonia tree blossoming in winter into a joyous occasion by staging a large banquet. However, not even the old Tai-tai was to be spared the reality of the broken fortunes of the Chia household. When told by Chia Cheng, her younger son, that the family was broke the Ancestress exclaimed:

So this is what we have come to! Then, it seems, we have been putting on false splendor for years and years past. I thought we had been laying by wonderful reserves.

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The Chia family was the family of an Imperial Household salt commissioner. Frederick Wakeman notes that these families were known as "salt fools (yen tai-tzu) who lavished fortunes on mechanized toys, Lake T'ai rock decorations and exotic pets... . They are so accustomed to their style of living that they cannot practice economy. So although outwardly the fabric is intact, the rot has set in inside." Yet, both the elements of extravagant wealth and scarcely-noticeable decline in the Chia household are necessary to the plot of the **Hung Lou Meng**. Pao-yu, as a developing spiritual stone, must be exposed to wealth and lavish sensualities before he can recognize the futility of material goods and the illusion of earthly existence.

Shih-ying, upon awakening from his dream, strolls onto the threshold of his house with his little girl, Lotus. A Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest, passing by in the street, stop in front of Shih-ying's house. The bonze repeatedly requests to be given the child. Shih-ying shys away, frightened. The bonze laughs and utters these prophetic words:

A fool dotes;
Tender blossoms
Are cut by the frost.
Take care
At New Year,
Fire and flame.

Shih-ying's entire future is foretold in these few verses. His "tender blossom," Lotus, disappears during the Lantern Festival held at New Year. Soon thereafter Shih-ying's house burns down. He eventually wanders off with a Taoist priest whose muttered poetry seems to describe his life quite well.

Pao-yu encounters in a dream the same couplet that Shih-ying read upon the pillars of the archway to the "Realm of Illusion." However, unlike Shih-ying, Pao-yu is accompanied by the Fairy of Fearful Awakening to the "Phantom Realm of the Great Void." The Fairy attempts to awaken Pao-yu from his state of amorous intellectual profligacy by having a dozen maidens perform twelve spirit songs from the dream of the Red Chamber. The last of these songs, entitled "Birds Fly Back to the Woods," goes like this:

The high official's fortune will decline;
The rich man's gold and silver will melt away;

The kind of heart will escape death;
The heartless will receive his due deserts;
He that takes life will pay with his own life;
He that causes tears will weep till his eyes are dry . . .
One that sees through this world will enter holy orders;
One enslaved by love will die a fruitless death.
Even so, when all food is gone, birds fly back to the woods,
Leaving nothing but bare, naked earth behind.

Once again a mortal, Pao-yu, has, through supernatural revelation, been exposed to prophetic foreshadowing. The first few verses of the song refer to the transience of the Chia family's wealth, the transience of worldly gain. The fourth to the last line foretells Pao-yu's enlightenment while the line immediately following tells the fate of Black Jade. The Fairy despairs because Pao-yu appears to be disinterested. However, the seeds of his enlightenment have been planted. As Lu Hsun writes: "Tragedy overshadows the (Chia) family's splendor, but Pao-yu is the only one conscious of this." Yet, Pao-yu's consciousness of this fact is a matter of spiritual growth, a profound realization which has difficulty surfacing.

Only a short time later Pao-yu is allowed another glimpse of the future. One day while Precious Clasp is examining his "stone of penetrating spiritual power," curiosity, aroused by the young servant girl Oriole, leads him to insist Precious Clasp show him her engraved, golden medallion. The lines on Pao-yu's stone, combined with the engraving on Precious Clasp's golden medallion, created a four-line stanza.

Never lose me, never forget me!
Glorious life—lasting prosperity!
Never leave me, never reject me!
Precious youth—lasting bloom!

Pao-yu later married Precious Clasp while believing he was to wed Black Jade. His struggle with his love for Black Jade is a result of their spiritual relationship. She is a part of Pao-yu's spiritual self while Precious Clasp is a part of his intellectual self, his earthly self. The two lines engraved on Precious Clasp's golden medallion were given to her by a mangy-headed bonze.

The Chia household is run by a woman, Madame Phoenix, the wife of Chia

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Lien. Years before the household was to fall into ruin, Phoenix was warned of the impending disaster by the spirit of her dead niece, Ko Ching. Appearing beside Phoenix' bed at night, Ko Ching reminded her aunt that prosperity did not last forever. She ended her warning with this couplet:

Spring passes, fragrance fades,
Be watchful of the position acquired.

Disregarding this sound Buddhist-Taoist advice, Phoenix contributes to the decline of the Chia family fortune by becoming extremely corrupt herself. Confucian philosophy tells us that prosperity fades when moral virtues wither.

While the overpowering movement of the **Hung Lou Meng** is one of degeneration, various elements of spiritual regeneration spin off from conditions of material decay. As we noted earlier, Shih-ying, lowered from his aristocratic status to a state of wretched poverty by a natural disaster, wanders off with a disciple of Lao Tzu. He reappears some forty-five chapters later to help enlighten his old benefactor Yu Tsun. The **Hung Lou Meng** ends with Shih-ying explaining the "story of the stone" to Yu Tsun after Yu's fortunes in the world of red dust have fallen in. Another good example of the regenerative element is the spontaneous enlightenment of the Cold Knight.

However, the most striking growth takes place in Pao-yu. His enlightenment begins in earnest when his stone (soul), after having become corrupted by the flesh and the senses, is restored to its original potency by a mangy bonze and a lame Taoist priest. "The stone originally possessed magic power," the bonze says to Pao-yu's father, Chia Cheng, "but its magic has been lost owing to the influences of the flesh and the senses. Bring the stone to us! We will restore its magic powers by incantations." Immediately after the stone's powers are restored, Pao-yu and Phoenix, having fallen under the influence of the sorceress Mother Ma, begin to recover.

Still, Pao-yu's enlightenment has only begun. Later, he loses his spirit stone and lapses into apathy and irrationality. This period in the story symbolizes Pao-yu's true spiritual crisis with his inner self; this is his "dark night of the soul." His contempt for and carelessness with his stone result from his misunderstanding his own spiritual nature. A thorough search of the grounds fails to turn up the stone. Wreath of Clouds, after "moving words and many humble bows," succeeds in persuading the nun, Miao Yu, to attempt to find

Pao-yu's stone through soothsaying. Their efforts produced the following lines:

Whence came I,
Whither go I,
 No sign betrays.
Under a green crag,
Near an old pine tree—
 Those are my ways!
You would seek me?
You would come to me?
 Not so, not so!
Tall hills divide us—
Loud laughter only
 Will greet you. Go!

No one knew exactly how to interpret these verses. The meaning, however, is quite clear. The stone had returned to the "Sphere of Banished Suffering." Pao-yu, in order to be whole again, was required to find his soul or know himself. The time for misunderstanding his stone, for neglecting it and for holding it in contempt was past. Pao-yu must either recognize his own spiritual nature or die. He must become a sage. As Lao Tzu once wrote:

He who knows others is learned;
He who knows himself is wise.

Pao-yu's soul was returned to him by the scabby-headed Buddhist monk who demanded ten thousand silver batzes for it. Immediately upon receiving his stone Pao-yu began to recover. Yet before his recovery was complete, he lapsed once more into unconsciousness. This time he dreamt of the "Blessed Realm of Purified Semblance." The archway entering into the "Blessed Realm" was adorned with this couplet:

Being in place of seeming is more than seeming.
Something in place of nothing is no longer nothing.

Upon entering the "Blessed Realm," Pao-yu encountered a magnificent building with a half-open door. Engraved upon the facade of the building, an obvious allegory for enlightenment, were these verses:

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Joy, grief, gladness, pain—
All is illusion. Why the care?
Longing, striving, desire, yearning—
All is vanity. Why the effort?

Partially awakened from his dream-vision, Pao-yu was now a likely candidate for enlightenment.

When the bonze came to collect for the stone, Pao-yu engaged him in a conversation, asking him if he came from the "Phantom Realm of the Great Void." The bonze answered, "What do I know of Phantom Realm or Great Void? I come from somewhere and I am going somewhere; that is all," he answered. "By the way, do you know the origin of the stone I brought back to you?" Pao-yu did not answer. "Then you do not know your own origin, yet you ask me about mine." Pao-yu thereupon became enlightened. He wished immediately to give his stone to the bonze, but he was detained in a struggle with the family. This struggle is highly symbolic. It suggests that Pao-yu was still struggling inwardly about his family's pitiful circumstances. Before he could fulfill his spiritual desires, he must fulfill his duty as a good Confucian son; he was compelled to rectify the names.

After becoming enlightened, Pao-yu gave up his Taoist philosophers for a time to study the Confucian texts. However, he began preparing his family for what was to come by sayings such as:

A son who to the Buddha vows his life
Opens heaven's gates to seven ancestors.

Pao-yu finished seventh in the national examinations, thereby bringing new prestige and good fortune to the Chia household. Thus, he rectified the names and fulfilled his proper Confucian role.

While returning from the examination field, Pao-yu became separated from his companions, never to be seen by them again. Indeed, Pao-yu's renunciation of the world would have meant little had he not achieved so great a feat by finishing seventh in the examinations. To renounce is to renounce something of value and until the examinations Pao-yu really had nothing to leave behind. Of course, he had had lavish riches as a child, but the Chia household was at the nadir of its cycle until Pao-yu's brilliant performance.

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Truly, this was a new dawn for the Chias, a dawn that Pao-yu chose to leave behind.

The only family member ever to see Pao-yu again was his father, Chia Cheng. While composing a letter one night upon a ship, Cheng stopped for a moment to collect his thoughts. At that moment he peered out of the window of the ship's cabin to see his son, Pao-yu, appear from out of the midst of a snowstorm. Pao-yu kowtowed four times to his father as a sign of respect and then silently turned and floated away with his companions, having fulfilled his earthly duty.

Many sequels have been written to continue the **Hung Lou Meng**, most likely in efforts to capitalize on the novel's immense popularity. To continue the "story of the stone" would be, to my mind, an absurdity. Ts'ao's novel is a lucid overview of the relationship between the two distinctly different philosophical tendencies in Chinese culture: Buddhism/Taoism and Confucianism. The complementary nature of these two ways of life create a world that is complete in itself. **The Dream of the Red Chamber** is the tale of the life cycle, the force that moves nature to reproduce and destroy. It confirms all and denies none; in this sense it is a mystical manifestation of the Taoist idea of the One. And the One needs no sequels.
